

THE ASSASSINATION :

ITS

Lessons to Young Men,

A DISCOURSE

DELIVERED IN THE

FIRST CONSTITUTIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,

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DISCOURSE.

“For at the window of my house I looked through my casement, and beheld among the simple ones, I discerned among the youth, a young man void of understanding.” Prov. vii, 6, 7.

DIOGENES, the cynic, is said to have lighted a candle and to have gone through the streets of Athens, at noon-day, searching for A MAN. In these later days, it might not require the same diligence of search to discover the man described in the text—the young man “void of understanding.” Rumor has it that this class is numerous, although should you, like the ancient cynic, go up and down the streets making inquiry of all the young men you meet, you would not find one, perhaps, that would say, “I am he whom you seek.” The young man who is “void of understanding” is unfortunately the last to make the discovery of the fact. This should make all young men, at least, modest in their assumption of an unusual degree of understanding. The case in hand to-night, all will agree, is a striking example of the class spoken of in the text. If there ever lived a young man utterly “void of understanding,” it was the guilty author of that shocking crime which has struck the world with horror, and made its perpetrator supremely infamous among all the criminals of time. If the circumstances did but permit it, it would be a great relief to believe that he was, indeed, wholly void of understanding; that he was utterly and beyond accountability insane. But, unfortunately, no such plea can be presented to extenuate his appalling guilt. In all its fearful enormity it must rest upon his soul forever. His account has, indeed, been soon

made up, and, sooner than he expected, he has had to meet the accusing spirit of our murdered President.

It was a *young* man that committed this horrid crime; and this would certainly justify, if, indeed, it does not require, that I should not permit the occasion to pass without calling the attention of the young men to some of those lessons which this tragic event would seem to inculcate—and this is the duty before us at this time.

One lesson presents itself so clearly before us all, that he who runs may read. It is a lesson upon the *danger which environs every young man* who will not steadily and persistently resist the temptations to evil which constantly beset him. Such is the depraved condition of the human heart, that no man is safe who yields to the slightest solicitations to wrong-doing. The first step but opens the door to the second, and once upon the inclined plane of crime the descent is natural and rapid to perdition. This deed proves that there is no possible measure of crime which the heart of man, under the power of temptation, excited by evil influences and unchecked by restraints, may not be induced to fill up. You may now resent with honest indignation the imputation of the possibility of your ever committing such a crime. God grant you never may. But Hazael, the young courtier of the king of Syria, with equal indignation, repelled the imputation of the weeping prophet, who foretold his future crimes.—“What, is thy servant a dog that he should do this thing?” But, in a few days, he assassinated his master, the king, and usurped his throne, and for forty years his reign was one huge crime.

What influences were brought to bear upon the mind of this young man, what motives, unhallowed and demonic, urged him on, we may not be able, wholly, here to discover; but we can see enough to know that if yielded to, if not sternly resisted, they would ruin any young man.

First, he was in heart *disloyal* to the Government under which he consented to live. This spirit of disloyalty he cherished until it grew into a deep, bitter,

rancorous hatred. This was the fundamental crime of this young man. It was that which constituted the basis on which the whole superstructure of iniquity was raised. This rancorous spirit, nourished and brooded over in the dark recesses of his soul, was excited and inflamed by those bad influences, which unhappily were all the while operating upon him, some of which we shall soon notice.

A *second* operating cause leading him onward to destruction, was the influence of the *bad company* with which he associated himself. This company was such as to all the while stimulate and inflame the malign passions which he was cherishing in his heart. Here was the great misfortune of this bad young man. He seems to have had no friend who, when he was venting his hatred against the Government and the President, its representative, could lay the hand of kind restraint upon his passions and subdue the tempest which agitated his soul.

Young gentlemen, the habitues of the drinking saloon, the gaming table, and the brothel are not those which will be likely to dissuade a young man from the evil which, in the silent chambers of his soul, he may be meditating.

There was, perhaps, also a vain and wicked *craving for notoriety*, like an evil spirit, stirring him up and urging him onward incessantly to the commission of the crime. He, perhaps, longed for that "bad eminence" which so enormous a crime would give him before the world; and was not unwilling, as he himself once intimated, to associate himself in immortal infamy with that hero in crime, who, in order to immortalize his name, fired the temple of Ephesus, but whose name, strange enough, the world has refused to remember.

And to all these operating causes and influences we must add, that *total want* of those moral and religious *restraints* which a *proper education* would have imposed upon him. and which would have withheld him from even the approving contemplation of so dire a crime.

These are some of the motives and influences which,

operating upon that nature susceptible of evil which we all possess, and which, unrestrained by education, companionship, conscience, judgment, or any moral or religious influences, at length secured the commission of this horrid crime, and the consignment to eternal infamy of its author.

And the lesson which we would have every young man draw from it is this, the danger of cherishing such a spirit ; or for a moment harboring such unhallowed designs or desires ; and of seeking such company and influences as would only serve to influence and stimulate to the commission of crime. Under such influences, no young man, though he may now, like Hazael, resent the imputation with scorn, is guaranteed or secure against the commission of any, even the most enormous and revolting, crimes. Let no young man trust the strength of his own good purpose and will, and so run into temptation. The wise man says, "He that trusteth to his own heart is a fool." And the case before us illustrates the danger of cherishing malignant feelings, and of approvingly contemplating a crime, which we may at the time have no thought or heart to commit. The stimulation of bad company, and wine, and opportunity, may, at any time, make us the executors of the crime itself. He who dallies with temptation to wrongdoing, is well nigh fallen already. He who approvingly contemplates the wrong of another is "void of understanding," and is not himself a moment safe.

"Enter not into the path of the wicked, and go not in the way of evil men. Avoid it, pass not by it,—turn from it, and pass away. For they sleep not except they have done mischief ; and their sleep is taken away except they cause some to fall. For they eat the bread of wickedness ; and drink the wine of violence."—*Prov. iv, 13, &c.*

"Be not wise in thine own eyes ; fear the Lord, and depart from evil. It shall be health to thy navel, and marrow to thy bones."—*Prov. iii, 7, 8.*

2.—A second lesson which is impressed upon us by this great crime is *the danger to young men of cherishing a disloyal spirit to the Government under which they live.*

Obedience to lawfully constituted Government is every where enjoined as a sacred duty in the word of God ; and it is required that that obedience be rendered not only to the good but to the froward and the perverse ; and it is furthermore required, that obedience be rendered, not from fear of punishment, but from conscience toward God,—obedience to rulers being duty to God. The cherishing of a disloyal spirit to a divinely constituted Government is, therefore, a sin against God. Now, it is not so much the sin as *the danger* to young men of cherishing this spirit to which we now call your special attention. Young men are proverbial, not so much for their prudence and discretion as for the fire, ardor and impulse of their feelings. With them, from feeling to action it is often but a moment and a step. Hence, if they imbibe wrong principles and cherish wrong feelings, they are always in danger of being stimulated to wrong action ; and hence, if a young man cherishes malign or rancorous feelings towards the Government under which he lives, and whose protection he receives, he is in danger of being spurred up by evil influences or circumstances to seek the destruction of that Government, and that commonly ends in his own destruction. This unhappy young man was, perhaps, not more virulent or bitter in his feelings than many others ; but, feeling as he did, and the influences brought to bear upon him being what they unhappily were, and incited by the devil to perhaps a mad ambition to immortalize his name, though it were in infamy, he was urged to strike a blow at the existence of Government itself, and to the doing of a deed from which, perhaps, not long ago, he would have shrunk with horror. To that supremacy of crime he never could have arrived, however much he may have disapproved the measures of the administration of the Government, if he had cherished a proper spirit of obedience to the Government itself, irrespective of the man or men who might at any time administer the Government. Men die, but Governments, being of God, survive ; and our loyal obedience to Government, whoever

for the time may rightfully administer it, should be as true, permanent and unchanging as is that divinely constituted Government itself. But if young men allow themselves to cherish the spirit of rancorous disloyalty towards the Government under which they consent to live, they may, in an unexpected moment, be incited by the devil to give body and act to their feelings, in a way which will load their names with infamy forever, and burden their souls with the guilt of a crime which eternity cannot expiate. The spirit of true loyalty to the Government to which he owed allegiance, would have saved this young man from the commission of a crime unparalleled in the history of the world, and from that untimely and horrid doom which has so soon overtaken him. I would be recreant to my duty, as a minister of Jesus Christ, and false to the welfare of the young men I address, and to the convictions of my own judgment and conscience, if I failed, young gentlemen, to say these things to you at this time. I appeal to your calm and mature reflection. Judge ye of the truth and propriety of what I say.

3.—We would have you also observe, as a third lesson of this tragic event, *how crime overleaps and defeats itself.*

Whatever may have been the motive which instigated this atrocious deed, it has been defeated. Was it, as the criminal himself declared, to aid the rebel cause? Nothing could have done it a greater disservice. Was it to injure the cause of the Government? Nothing could so efficiently have served that cause throughout the world. Was it revenge upon the President whom he slew? He has immortalized his virtues as a ruler, and crowned his memory with the glories of martyrdom, and made his name thrice honored and dear to his country and to humanity forever. Was it notoriety he sought before the world, as the reward of so great a crime? It is infamy, deep, damning and eternal, which he has reaped. Was it honor and reward from those in arms against the Government? All they, except robbers and assassins, reject his aid, denounce his

deed, and rejoice in the swift-footed justice which has overtaken him. Was it to arrest the progress of the cause of emancipation, which the criminal hated and the President loved? The blood of the President has, under God, sealed irrevocably the success of that cause. Was it, by taking away the head of Government, to create a revolution, as was attempted in the West last summer, and thus destroy the Government and introduce anarchy and confusion throughout the land? Nothing could so effectually have defeated its own aim, and have cemented and welded and intensified the power of this Government as the martyrdom of its twice chosen head. Was it designed to destroy the personal influence and popularity of Mr. Lincoln? Oh! infatuation of crime, nothing could so certainly and so immeasurably have deepened, hardened, strengthened and perpetuated that influence and popularity, even to the remotest ages, as his assassination. See then young gentlemen, see how crime overleaps itself and defeats its own vain and wicked ends. Whatever may have been his purpose and design, was there ever a crime which more completely defeated itself? Was there ever a young man so "*utterly void of understanding*" as was he? Let not then this lesson, young men, fail of its due impression upon your hearts and lives. Nothing will so certify your success in life as *to be right*; and nothing will so surely defeat your aims as *to be wrong*. Your very success will itself be your defeat. This lesson evolves itself from the history of this crime; and every one, but he that is "void of understanding," must feel and acknowledge its solemn impressiveness. This lesson must go forth upon the young men of this nation with an increasingly salutary influence; and it will illustrate the impossibility of destroying the influence of a good ruler by killing him; the blindness and infatuation of crime; and the methods in which God will make even this great "*wrath of man to praise Him.*"

4.—And there is here, also, a most instructive lesson upon *the certainty of crime overtaking its author.*

This crime was so planned by its actor as to give theatrical effect to the whole tragedy. It was to be enacted in the theatre ; the actor was to leap upon the stage, utter his tragic exclamation before the petrified audience ; and then suddenly disappear in the darkness, and so safely escape. The plan was well laid, why should it not have succeeded, and the criminal now, beyond the reach of justice, be revelling with his co-conspirators in the rewards and promised honors of their crime ? Because, young gentlemen, God hates crime, and sets his trap for the criminal. What was it that, perhaps more than anything else, defeated this well laid plan of final escape, and secured the speedy dog's death and burial of the assassin ? Was it not that same *flag* itself which he hated ? It caught him by his spur, threw him upon the stage, fractured his limb and thus ultimately delayed and prolonged his flight until the agents of justice overtook him, and a speedy retribution was visited upon him. How little could the infuriated actor in that tragedy have foreseen how the Providence of God was arranging for his capture and his punishment. How little could he have anticipated that so trifling a cause should certify so speedy a retribution ? The surest pledge of the discovery and the avenging of crime is, under the providence of God, the crime itself. When once committed, it is gone forth to the world, and who shall hide its author ? The winds may whisper his name ; the sun, the moon, the stars may reveal it. The flag whose majesty he despises may accuse him. The spur, whose aid he seeks in escape, may arrest him. The limb, that was to aid his flight, may prevent it. Every means designed to facilitate escape may impede it. All agencies and instrumentalities, from the moment of the commission of a crime, become the servants of God's providence and justice, to reveal the criminal and avenge his crime. The certainty of punishment overtaking the criminal is written as the lesson upon every page of history ; and it is only the blind that cannot see it, and the man "void of understanding" that will not regard it.

Let the young men who hear me bear this lesson along with them into the temptations to wrong-doing by which they are daily beset. Be not deceived by the tempter when he cries against God, "ye shall not surely die," "ye shall not surely suffer for wrong-doing." Listen not to his persuasions. Once committed, the telegraph instantly spreads your crime over the world, and all the agents of justice set out upon your track; and even quicker than the lightning of the telegraph, God's omniscience has reported it, and at his appointed time, his providence will reveal the criminal, and his justice will avenge the crime.

Prov. xix, 27.—"Cease my son," cries the wise man, "to hear instruction that causeth to err from the words of knowledge."

"Judgments are prepared for scorers, and stripes for the back of fools."

Prov. v, 22, 23.—"His own iniquities shall take the wicked himself, and he shall be holden with the cords of his sins, he shall die without instruction and in the greatness of his folly he shall go astray."

Such, young gentlemen, are some of the lessons to which I have begged the privilege of calling your attention, as suggested by this awful crime, which has shocked and horrified you all. Others have, doubtless, suggested themselves to your minds. Only the young man "void of understanding" could have permitted such an event to occur without having derived from it impressive lessons and influences for his own improvement and guidance. Be assured you cannot too faithfully meditate these lessons, or too anxiously seek their healthful influence upon your lives. We live in a day of peculiar temptations and trials to young men. How many in these days are taught to consider the greatest crimes known to human laws as virtues? How many are taught to heroize the man who lifts his hand against the majesty of law and government, and who seeks madly to destroy the foundations of authority and estab-

lished order? Young gentlemen, be not deceived by these delusions and sophisms by which thousands, "void of understanding," have been lured on to their destruction. Shun, as you would the devil, the man who extenuates or apologizes for this crime. Rise above the excitements of the hour and take your stand upon the platform of those great moral and religious principles, which shall survive the changes, shocks and revolutions of time, and withstand the trials even of the final day.

I exceedingly regret that this criminal was a *young* man. Such unhallowed pre-eminence in crime should have been reserved for the hoary headed villain whom long practice in iniquity had made insensible to its guilt. I lament that the dishonor should have fallen upon that class, which, I was about to say, more than any other I respect and love. But though it was a young man that did it, it was not the young men that did it. I fain would believe that there is not another young man in all our land of such hardihood in crime as to be willing to damn himself to such immortal infamy. I rejoice to exculpate you all from the complicity of even the first emotion of approval of this horrid crime; and I shall ever pray that God will give you grace for every hour of temptation; deliver you from all evil; guide you through a true, honorable and upright life; and, finally, bring you all, through the mediation and death of our gracious Redeemer, to the home of the blessed on high.

AMEN.